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SENSITIVE

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA, PRM/AFR

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TAGS: [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [EG](#) [ER](#)
SUBJECT: EGYPT ALLEGEDLY DEPORTS POSSIBLE ERITREAN

REFUGEES

REF: A. SECSTATE 61253

[1](#)B. CAIRO 965

[1](#)C. CAIRO 479

Sensitive but unclassified, not for Internet
distribution.

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: While we cannot confirm Amnesty International allegations that Egypt has deported hundreds of Eritreans seeking refuge in Egypt, our UNHCR contacts say that convincing circumstantial evidence shows that Egypt deported at least some Eritreans to either Eritrea or Sudan between June 11 and 14. On June 15, the MFA refugees office told us - and UNHCR confirmed - that UNHCR would be granted access to Eritreans held in Egyptian detention "in the next few days." We have encouraged GOE contacts in the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Interior to allow UNHCR access to all Eritrean detainees before deciding whether or not to deport them. End summary.

Egypt Allegedly Deports Eritreans: A Sequence of Events

[1](#)2. (SBU) On June 13, an Amnesty International (AI) representative told us that, on June 11, Egypt had deported 200 Eritreans held at a detention center in the southern Egyptian governorate of Aswan directly to Asmara, and that on June 12 a further 200 Eritreans were deported to Asmara from the same detention center. AI's sources were: lawyers who had been representing the Eritreans in Egyptian courts; at least one Eritrean detainee; an employee at the Aswan airport allegedly aware of charter Egypt Air flights to Asmara; and unofficial discussions with Egyptian security officers. The AI representative also noted that many of the mobile phones of Eritreans who were allegedly deported were now out of service.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Also on June 13, we encouraged contacts in both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and Ministry of Interior (MOI) to give UNHCR access to all Eritreans in Egyptian custody before making any decisions as to their disposition per ref A instructions. UNHCR Deputy Regional Representative for Protection Katharina Lumpp told us that she believed that preparations to deport at least one group of approximately 180 Eritreans being held in Aswan governorate were underway, but could not confirm that any deportations had actually occurred. She confirmed that the GOE had ceased allowing UNHCR access to Eritrean migrants for refugee status determinations on

February 27, 2008, and that UNHCR was continuing to request this access both in Cairo and through UNHCR headquarters in Geneva.

¶4. (SBU) On June 14, an AI representative told us that 100 Eritreans had been deported on June 13 and that plans were being made for more deportations. Later on June 14, State Security Investigative Service's (SSIS) Chief of Operations denied that Egypt had deported any Eritreans on June 13, and said that the GOE was not planning to return any Eritreans to Eritrea but rather intended to return those who had transited Sudan on their way to Egypt back to Sudan. However, neither he nor MFA Deputy Assistant Minister for Refugees Tarek El Maaty, with whom we also spoke on June 14, confirmed or denied that any deportations of Eritreans had yet occurred.

¶5. (SBU) On June 15, El Maaty told us that the GOE had approved UNHCR's requested access to Eritreans being held in Egyptian detention, and that he expected access to occur "maybe as we speak." UNHCR Spokesperson Abeer Etefa confirmed later that day that the GOE had granted UNHCR access, which was to happen in the next few days, "but we'll see what form that access takes." Revising Lump's original estimate, she said that circumstantial reports were convincing that Egypt had deported "at least some Eritreans" - though the destination was uncertain - between June 11 and 14. She noted that UNHCR was sending staff to Aswan to get a better sense of events on the ground.

Why Are Eritreans a Concern?

¶6. (SBU) Lump opined that the GOE had originally cut off UNHCR's access to Eritreans in early 2008 because, with UNHCR granting refugee status to Eritreans at a rate of about 90 percent, a surge in the number of Eritreans illegally entering Egypt caused fears that Egypt would be forced to accept an ever increasing number of refugees. Egypt already hosts a large number of Sudanese refugees and faces a continued flow of African migrants illegally transiting Egypt to reach Israel (ref B). El Maaty confirmed this line of thinking, saying that Egypt does not have the capacity to absorb continuing flows of poor migrants, and stressed potentially security concerns by welcoming further flows. However, El Maaty disputed UNHCR estimates that Egypt is holding about 1600 Eritreans who illegally entered the country, claiming that the number is "at most 300 to 400." No matter the numbers, Lump and El Maaty agreed that about half of Eritreans entered Egypt through Sudan, some after having obtained UNHCR refugee status there, with the other half coming directly to Egypt via the Red Sea.

¶7. (SBU) El Maaty claimed that Egypt has always abided by UNHCR designations of refugee status and plans to continue to do so, but implied that Egypt is not required to do so as "other countries" do not always refer potential refugee cases to UNHCR. He complained that Egypt is shouldering more than its fair share of the refugee burden. He asked for the U.S. and European countries to take a more active role in resettling refugees, though he thanked us for the U.S.'s recent acceptance of a handful of Sudanese for resettlement.

Comment

¶8. (SBU) If reports of Eritrean deportations are true, the GOE may be trying to send a message to any further would-be Eritrean migrants that they are not welcome in Egypt. We hope to have more information on how many Eritreans, if any, have actually been deported when UNHCR gains their promised access later this week. In the meantime, we are continuing to encourage the GOE to abide by the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees and to provide UNHCR access to any who may be in jeopardy of

refoulement.

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